The Things We Wanted to Keep: The Commonwealth and the National Estate 1969–1974

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Abstract
The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate published in 1974 was a symbolic highpoint of national engagement in cultural heritage and paved the way for establishment of the Australian Heritage Commission and the Register of the National Estate. The events which led up to this breakthrough are less well known. Heritage conservation entered the arena of public policy only gradually from the 1960s. The national level – our main focus here – was championed by Tom Uren (i) and Gough Whitlam, whose vision for Australian cities and regions linked heritage to a broader Commonwealth mandate. Influential on their thinking was the American precedent of federal involvement in conservation. This paper explores the years leading up to and immediately following the 1972 Federal Election and subsequent formation of Federal Labor’s Department of Urban and Regional Development, with its often overlooked role in heritage conservation. In reflecting on the more recent neo-liberal dismantling of extensive national involvement in heritage conservation, we trace the rise and fall of the concept of the National Estate at two key points in its history.

Introduction: looking back
The Australian Government’s commitment to heritage conservation has demonstrably waned through legislative changes, redirections in policy, bureaucratic reshuffles and financial cutbacks. In this current political milieu, this paper revisits a more sanguine period when the concept of the National Estate emerged and took hold. A symbolic highpoint, the 1974 Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate (the Hope Inquiry) paved the way for the establishment of the Register of the National Estate and the Australian Heritage Commission (AHC). Whilst there are scholarly contributions which trace aspects of the history of heritage conservation in Australia, much less attention has been accorded the story at the federal level – our main focus here – was championed by Tom Uren and Gough Whitlam, whose vision for Australian cities and regions linked heritage to a broader Commonwealth mandate. Influential on their thinking was the American precedent of federal involvement in conservation.

Towards an Australian understanding of the National Estate
The concept of the National Estate was reportedly first identified in the Australian political landscape. Propelled by local environmental concerns, advocacy by special interest groups and lobbying from voluntary organisations such as the National Trust, heritage entered the political/policy arena incrementally but decisively through the 1960s. Three key threads are traced here which crystallised into government commitments by 1973. First is the influence of American ideology in inculcating a sense of national stewardship of land and cultural resources. Second is the critical role played by prominent advocates at the national level, notably Tom Uren and Gough Whitlam. Third is the important role played by the Department of Urban and Regional Development (DURD) as federal commitment to managing urban and regional matters intensified. In addition to the more frequently cited urban focus of DURD, heritage conservation was integral to the Department’s genesis (DEC 1974). While numerous accounts of DURD highlight its success in the urban arena (e.g., inner city regeneration and suburban infrastructure), such accounts often mention the department’s heritage accountabilities only in a cursory fashion or omit them entirely (Lloyd & Troy 1981). In addressing this gap, our main period of interest is thus the lead up to establishment of the 1974 Hope Inquiry. By contrasting this earlier period with the more recent dismantling of national involvement in heritage, we thus trace the inception and seeming demise of the National Estate.

This project was initiated from a reading of the Patrick Troy papers held by the City Futures Research Centre at the University of New South Wales and advanced through consulting additional resources held by the National Archives and National Library of Australia. The research draws on a mix of primary and secondary sources; notably government publications. The paper has three main sections: a scope of the evolution of the National Estate concept to 1972, highlighting the leadership of Whitlam and Uren; a description and evaluation of DURD’s activities, and; a brief account of the climactic work of the Hope Inquiry. Our conclusion reflects upon the ensuing years and the wavering trajectory of the early touchstone of a National Estate.

Members of the Congress … We are all trustees for the American people, custodians of the American heritage. It is my task to report the State of the Union – to improve it is the task of us all … We also need for the...
sixties, if we are to bequeath our full national estate to our heirs, a long range conservation and recreation program, expansion of our superb national parks and forests, preservation of our authentic wilderness areas.

(Kennedy 1962b)

Kennedy used the term on more than one occasion, perhaps influenced by Stewart Udall, his Secretary of the Interior, who was known for his environmental legislation and creation of national parks. In the preface to Udall’s The Quiet Crisis, the phrase was similarly grounded in regard to the natural environment: ‘We must develop new instruments of foresight and protection and nurture in order to recover the relationship between man and nature and make sure that the national estate we pass on to our multiplying descendants is green and flourishing’ (John F. Kennedy in Udall 1963: xiii). Obvious within the rhetoric of the National Estate was intergenerational equity, a concept transferred into the Australian context.

The phrase came into usage in Australian conservation politics in the late 1960s. In its early incarnation the National Estate tended to equate to the natural environment but soon widened in scope to encompass a broader understanding of human-environment interactions and cultural landscapes (Lloyd 1977). Whitlam’s acknowledgment of the American derivation of the term was perhaps an effort to establish its authority. Tom Uren (1995: 271) contends that Whitlam himself did not select the phrase but that it was provided to him by one of his staff, Race Mathews. In fact, both men applied the term differently, with Whitlam mobilising the concept as a rhetorical device and Uren refining it more as a tool of policy. The contributions of Whitlam and Uren effectively fused the rising tide of interest in urban and environmental issues in the Australian electorate into a federal policy platform by the late 1960s.

The period from the early 1950s to the early 1970s marked the so-called ‘long boom’, a period of sustained economic growth which generated a whole new scale of urban development. Australian cities were transformed but urban growth became increasingly synchronous with environmental degradation (J. Colman cited in Commonwealth Government of Australia 1974: 21). A new agenda was required to balance the challenges of urban development, economic growth and conservation. Through the 1960s conservation inexorably became more and more mainstream concern (Cornwall & Ashton 2006). Resident action groups formed and surprising alliances between the Builders Labourers Federation and conservationists would result in Green Bans which prevented demolition and development of important historic places and natural landscapes.

(ii) Environmental action had burgeoned, as did the membership of the State and Territory-based National Trusts which spearheaded conservation and preservation across Australia to contribute to the development of community awareness. In 1965 the Australian Council of National Trusts was established as a peak body to provide a unified voice on heritage conservation to government. Membership of the Australian Conservation Foundation almost trebled from 2,500 in 1970 to over 7,000 members by 1972 (DURD 1973a). By 1974, the number of people associated with conservation groups was estimated at more than 100,000 (Commonwealth Government of Australia 1974: 25). At all levels of government, environmental conservation had transitioned into mainstream politics and could no longer be ignored.

Whitlam recalls his interest in the idea of fostering a national commitment to Australia’s natural and cultural assets: ‘During the late 1960s, as part of my campaign on urban and regional issues, I raised the idea of the Australian Government establishing an inventory of natural and historical assets’ (Whitlam 1985: 547). He captured the zeitgeist when he championed the National Estate alongside equity, economic prosperity, housing and urban civic pride into his policy platform.

In an election speech in October 1969 Whitlam concluded:

[We] are opening … a crusade to give all our people the opportunities to which they are entitled in a rich and growing nation; a crusade to ensure equal educational opportunities for all our children, to take financial harassment and despair out of ill-health, to allow our young people to plan ahead for their homes and their family without a life-time of debt, to restore dignity and creativity to retirement, to prevent our cities and towns from becoming vast, unplanned slums, to conserve our national estate, to keep the beauty we have been given and keep out the ugliness we can only make for ourselves … to give Australia her proper place of partnership in our region, to use our influence … to build a truly great and good civilisation here. (Whitlam 1969b)

His vision of the National Estate encompassed a nation-wide survey of land which would identify and record areas of population growth, natural resources including minerals and water, soil fertility, and areas to be conserved for their natural or cultural values. These results would then be fed into land use planning by state and local governments, ensuring that economic growth, urban development and conservation were each given due regard. (Whitlam 1969a)

Whitlam’s agenda was ambitious and underpinned by a distinctive focus on urban development. His engagement from 1960 as Deputy Leader of the Labor Party and then as Leader from 1967 was stired by the charm between memories of his formative years in the privileged planned city of Canberra and the realities of the raw post-war suburbs in his outer-Sydney electorate of Werriwa (Lloyd & Troy 1981: 17). Citing Humphrey Carver, Director of the Canadian Council on Urban and Regional Research, Whitlam went so far as to suggest that the following words should be immortalised by being inscribed on the lintel of Australia’s new parliament house: ‘Building cities is far the most difficult, complex and majestic thing that men do. In this we came nearest in scale to what God does in creating the landscape, the stars, the hills and the forests’ (Whitlam 1968).

Whitlam’s presidential-style politics and holistic vision, marrying conservation with land use planning and future economic development with social reform, were deeply rooted in the American political vision of the early 1960s. Moreover, the American model of federalism, which was vigorous and fiscally interventionist, provided Whitlam with a working framework for negotiating responsibilities between the Commonwealth and the States on a number of policy fronts. In his landmark 1968 Walter Burley Griffin Memorial Lecture the model emerged for a new federal government instrumentality with responsibility for facilitating a total urban environment planned and developed in response to population growth and other urban pressures. He quoted US President Lyndon Johnson: ‘We must make sure that every family ... lives in a home of dignity and a
neighbourhood of pride and a community of opportunity and a city of promise and hope (Whitlam 1969a: 14). The US Department of Housing and Urban Development loomed as a working model. In a presentation to the Melbourne University Political Science Society on ‘Governments and Cities’ in August 1970, Whitlam stated that a new ‘Department of Urban Affairs must act as initiator and co-ordinator of efforts to conserve Australia’s national estate … The Australian Government should see itself as the curator and not the liquidator of the national estate’ (Whitlam 1985: 547).

Uren’s socio-economic profile, a talented sportsman and small businessman from a working class background, was in stark contrast to Whitlam’s. But in parallel he developed his own sensibility to urban, environmental and heritage issues to become the minister in Whitlam’s Government responsible for translating their common ideals into the working machinery of government. Uren had been the Member for Reid in inner western Sydney from 1958 and Opposition spokesman for Urban and Regional Affairs, and the Environment from 1969. He had a long standing commitment to the ‘attainment of harmony between man and his environment’ (Uren 1971: 2). Assisted by Peter Ellyard, the then Parliamentary Librarian and later adviser to the Minister for the Environment, Moss Cass, he had diligently observed the United States debates on the environment and preservation, and used this material to inform his own Walter Burley Griffin Memorial Lecture in Canberra on 3 November 1972, just one month before Labor won office. In this speech Uren was ‘dreaming aloud’ about husbanding a new and radical idealistic vision for planning Australian cities and regions. Similarly inspired by progressive American environmental policy and thought like Whitlam, he aspired to create a better living environment for all – a humane environment that was truly national and thoroughly integrated.

In canvassing solutions to population growth, urban sprawl, decentralisation, poor infrastructure, environmental degradation and social inequity, Uren (1972: 17) adopted a philosophical framework from the emerging scientific field of systems ecology wherein everything is connected to everything else. He cited Barry Commoner’s book The Closing Circle (1971) which stresses how all species are connected by an interlocked network of energy and nutrients. Rather than continuing to propose ad hoc or partial solutions, Uren’s vision for environmental planning and conservation was holistic. It was not anti-growth but realistically founded on the fundamental principle that natural resources were finite. Again echoing the American planning agenda, urban and economic growth was to be environmentally wise and guided by the most ‘thorough and comprehensive environment impact assessment and planning’ (Uren 1972: 19). Uren espoused the need for integrated planning, led by humane planners working in multi-disciplinary teams who would be informed by the citizenry to help solve environmental problems.

In his Walter Burley Griffin lecture lecture Uren quotes at length from Lyndon Johnson’s ‘Credo to Preserve our National Heritage’ (1966) which emphasised the rights and responsibilities of individuals to access, enjoy and protect the natural and cultural environments. Conservation was central, but embodied not only the preservation of flora and fauna, but a social dimension preserving ‘historical buildings and other parts of our cultural identity’ (Uren 1972: 14). In his autobiography Straight Left, Uren (1995) cites a speech in September 1970 as the first concrete evidence of these ideas in foreshadowing the concept of the National Estate. As he explained, ‘For a number of years I [had] been trying to get the Commonwealth interested in our historic homes and in particular Elizabeth Farm Cottage at Rose Hill near Parramatta’. He had witnessed first-hand the destruction and loss of significant heritage buildings:

I well recall walking through Sydney on a nostalgic Christmas Eve in 1971 … I strolled around the city we love and how sad it was to see the T&G building straddled with steel scaffolding. Very soon an era of architecture will disappear. As I strolled through the city the very heart of it seemed to be torn out. I stood on the corner of King and George Streets and gazed at the majestic, expressive sandstone building which so described its era. It jarred on one to see the timber construction which had been placed around it, preparing for demolition … I thought, haven’t they enough accrued wealth without destroying something that belongs to our heritage? (Uren 1995: 271)

As his vision broadened from historic houses to the wider built environment, he formed the view that ‘in one of the most urbanised nations in the world, we need to be the guardians against further destruction of our environment’ (Uren 1974–1982). He saw a role for government in helping to fund conservation projects in the national interest. In 1970 the nexus between public expenditure and heritage conservation materialised in a scheme for a National Resources Fund to provide finance for a range of purposes including the acquisition or conservation of historic buildings and important landscape areas (Lloyd 1977: 16).

From rhetoric to action – The DURD years

The concept of the National Estate was said to be ‘a powerful crystallisation of an emergent but hitherto almost unfocussed idea’ (Australian Heritage Commission 1985: 6). The National Estate sought to effectively encapsulate diverse and ad hoc grass roots concerns for the natural and cultural environment and channel them into a working bureaucratic construct. Whitlam’s audacious use of Kennedy’s words provided an eloquent distillation of Uren’s impassioned feelings and views about the natural and cultural environment. As Uren (1996) recalled, ‘different people had asked me what I meant by the National Estate and I’d talk about the landscape of the lower Blue Mountains, the foreshores of Sydney Harbour, that clump of lemon-scented gums, spotted gums between Appin and Campbelltown and remember if you go up into the Bellingen Valley there’s a magnificent stand of melaleucas’. Uren’s imprecision concerned Whitlam who wanted something more concrete to work with, especially given the fact that Whitlam had promised in his policy speech on 12 November 1972 ‘to preserve and enhance the quality of the National Estate’ (King 1975: 63). Nevertheless, whilst Uren was often idiosyncratic and original in his language and expression, he brought a coherence and clarity which Whitlam’s responses often lacked (Lloyd & Troy 1981: 19). It was, in fact, Uren who set in train the processes that would codify the meaning of the National Estate and see it accepted into both popular parlance and public policy.

The new government’s development of policy in heritage was
incremental, inquiry-based and never fully realised in its lifetime (December 1972 – December 1975). A mixture of initiatives was explored such as protective regulations governing demolition, federal funding of conservation works, taxation and rates concessions, gifts of property to the nation or conservation organisations, promotional activities and community education (DURD 1973a: 27). One important influence informing the approach was a report by a UNESCO Mission to Australia by British architect Ian Grant released just before the 1972 election (Hobhouse 1998). Grant reported on policy for the preservation and restoration of nineteenth century buildings and was damning of Australia’s politicians and lawmakers whom he considered ‘way behind and out of touch with a public that is becoming increasingly concerned’ (Grant 1973: 49). Grant considered that natural and cultural heritage conservation required four key things: first, broad public support for conservation; second, laws to protect the environment; third, a critical mass of educated experts including planners, historians, architects and builders; and fourth, echoing Uren’s pragmatism, a range of financial measures and incentives (Grant 1973: 51–2). These requirements coalesced under DURD.

DURD was officially created on 19 December 1972, the same day that Uren was sworn in as Minister having been forced by Whitlam to choose between the urban development and environment portfolios (McMahon Ministry 1972). As a major department almost equal with Treasury, DURD became the vehicle for developing, among other things, a practical approach to defining and implementing the hitherto rhetorical concept of the National Estate. While DURD’s organisational structure seemed unremarkable, it did not intend to work conventionally (Landsdown 1973). With key adviser Patrick Troy from the Australian National University directly involved in administering the new department, DURD represented a ‘new venture in federalism’ with sweeping powers and a leadership mandate. It commenced its work during an unprecedented era of concern with urban and environmental issues: ‘resident action and environmental groups had proliferated, demanding government action to improve city life, and citizen participation in the directions and character of urban life’ (DURD 1973a: 5).

The Administrative Arrangement Orders which created DURD were gazetted in December 1972. The Orders stated that DURD’s role primarily concerned ‘matters relating to city and regional planning and development, including assistance to and cooperation with the States and local government bodies’ (DURD 1973a: 1). Initially only six main functions were proposed by DURD’s Secretary R.B. Landsdown (1973) in his correspondence to A.S. Cooley, Chairman of the Public Service Board. In practice DURD would commence with eight key sections including heritage which was on equal footing with the others (1973: 19). The development of a national urban and regional development policy was a high priority for DURD. Heritage figured in that policy; two of the main elements were the ‘preservation of buildings and areas of historical and architectural importance’ and the ‘conservation and protection of areas of natural amenity in or near urban areas’ (Uren 1975a).

During 1973 and 1974, DURD engaged in research and extensive consultation regarding its heritage agenda (DURD 1974: 1). It took direct action focussing on specific projects that epitomised the critical urban development issues of the period. Rather than ‘bulldozing’ its way through a heavy-handed top down approach, the department’s approach sought to be consultative, arrived at through discussion and negotiation with all interested parties, albeit in an often fast-moving development situations. With specific regard to heritage and urban planning, the key projects in the initial years of DURD were focussed on three historic inner city residential areas: Emerald Hill in Melbourne, and Woolloomooloo and Glebe in Sydney (Ruming, Tice & Freestone 2010). In these contested arenas DURD carefully balanced its role as ‘an initiator, an innovator and coordinator of efforts to conserve Australia’s national estate’ with its role in urban development in line with the dual national responsibilities which Whitlam (1969c) had envisaged as early as 1969.

The National Estate agenda was advanced administratively prior to the government receiving considered independent advice on the matter. The prevailing view within DURD was that ‘the States lacked not only money, but leadership and co-ordination with Australian Government policy. The National Estate required survey, in association with others to establish areas, buildings etc ... justifying special attention, planning action, land acquisition’ (Uren 1975b). By the time of the First Annual Report (DURD 1973a: 27), the National Estate was being conceived as ‘a powerful agent for protecting and enhancing the inherited products of man and nature which could have aesthetic, historical, cultural, recreational or scientific significance, despite the pressures for change’.

DURD’s 1973 budget included an allocation of $2.5m mainly for non-repayable interest free grants, a realisation of Uren’s dream of a national resources fund. Whilst this initial allocation was earmarked specifically for land acquisition, by January 1974 it was expanded to encompass research, restoration and construction (Lloyd & Troy 1981: 183). Direct grants were also made to state National Trusts and various key conservation organisations. During the program’s first year nearly 100 projects were funded, although the total expenditure by 30 June 1974 was only $288,000. This was largely due to late program changes which expanded the types of projects eligible for funding and the lag in acceptance by the States. The under expenditure was exacerbated by a lack of departmental staff to administer the grants, which was done in the absence of a legislative framework via the time consuming and complex mechanisms available under Section 96 of the Constitution. In 1974–75 a total of $7.5m was distributed to 346 projects with the lion’s share of funding allocated to buying and restoring historic buildings followed closely by open space acquisition (Lloyd 1977: 19).

Things moved fast. The momentum was in part due to the groundswell of public interest and support for the government’s platform but also to Uren’s determination. Although overshadowed by other initiatives such as growth centres, sewerage backlogs and land commissions, the National Estate was a key plank of DURD’s strategic land use planning framework. Its identification, assessment and conservation were considered vital to regional and local planning. DURD recognised that shifting the ideals and objectives of environmental conservation into a comprehensive land use planning framework was crucial if its agenda was to enjoy broad community support. The intention was for conservation of the National Estate to become ‘a dynamic exercise in land use planning’ (DURD 1973b: Introduction).
Partly as a result of administrative challenges at the departmental level, DURD nonetheless struggled with defining the National Estate and the administration and distribution of grants was somewhat patchy. Nevertheless, in the years prior to its abolition in December 1975, DURD had succeeded in establishing heritage as a national responsibility and had moved to back this ideological commitment with public funding (Freestone 2010: 32–33). Yet what was apparent early, and highlighted by lobbying from conservation groups such as the Australian Council of National Trusts (2005), was the need for a more comprehensive examination of the nature and policy prescriptions of the National Estate concept. Responding to this need, Uren’s second great initiative was initiating a Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate.

Towards an Australian Heritage Commission

There remains debate about who was the principal architect for initiating the Committee of Inquiry on the National Estate. Whitlam (1985: 548) implies he was responsible. Uren claims the inquiry was largely his brainchild, although he does acknowledge the assistance of his advisors John Mant and Rob Dempsey (Uren 1995: 262). The inquiry under the chairmanship of Justice Robert Hope was formally announced by Whitlam in May 1973 and was to report jointly to Uren and the Minister for Environment and Conservation, Dr Moss Cass.

Members of the Committee included R.N. Walker, Milo Dunphy, Judith Wright McKinney, Len Webb, David Yencken, Keith Vallance and Judith Brine, with several prominent conservationists in these ranks. One of the inquiry’s key terms of reference was to determine ‘the role which the Australian Government could play in the preservation and enhancement of the National Estate’. Hope’s view was that the Commonwealth ‘could and should give a lead to the whole of Australia’ (Hope 1974: 27). His Committee was to recommend the establishment of a national heritage commission, the development of a register of significant items, and protective legislation. The Committee issued a draft report in April 1974 and its final report in September that year. Uren, on tabling the final report, provided an insight into how the concept of the National Estate had evolved into an inclusive representation of Australia’s significant national and cultural environments:

The range of the National Estate extends from great national parks and awesome rain forests to a simple stand of trees or patch of coastline. It includes the remaining treasures of our colonial architecture and such homely parts of the national heritage as paddlesteamers and a Chinese joss house. (Report of the Interim Committee on the National Estate 1975)

Ultimately, it was this inquiry that gave the National Estate definitive expression. The government had essentially concurred with the likely key recommendations some five months before the final report appeared. In an election policy speech in May 1974, Gough Whitlam’s words signalled the confirmation of the National Estate as a signature policy of the Labor Government:

We are the first generation of Australians to become sharply aware of the conflicting demands between growth and preservation of the environment. Our government is the first Australian government to attempt to develop sound environmental policies to reconcile these demands, to ensure that growth and development are not bought at the price of the destruction of the nation’s natural and historical inheritance ... The national estate belongs to all Australians. We have accepted the responsibility of the national government to help protect it and preserve it for the benefit of all Australians ... For the first time Australia has a government determined to preserve, protect and enhance Australia’s national estate - our natural and historical inheritance, what we keep from our past, what we transmit to the future. (Whitlam 1974)

In August 1974 the Interim Committee on the National Estate under the chairmanship of David Yencken was established (Troy 1974). Its inquiries, codification of assessment procedures, development of funding criteria, instigation of research, and response to the heritage impacts of natural disasters like Cyclone Tracy helped in the transitioning of heritage management from DURD to the new Australian Heritage Commission which was legislated for in June 1975.

The Australian Heritage Commission Act (No 57 of 1975) defined the National Estate as ‘those places, being components of the natural environment ... or the cultural environment of Australia, that have aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other special value for future generations as well as for the present community’. Parliamentary approval for the establishment of the Australian Heritage Commission was hampered by the dismissal of the Whitlam Government. Further legislation was necessary before the agency came to fruition under the Fraser Liberal Government in 1976 (Davison & McConville 1991: 44).

Conclusion: then and now

The history from that point is another story (see Cornwall & Ashton 2006). Since the mid-1970s heritage has been both institutionalised and professionalised. A complex multi-level legislative framework involving State and Territory bureaucracies evolved alongside a multi-sector industry involving a new breed of specially trained heritage professionals operating within a completely new institutional setting based on the activities of Australia ICOMOS (founded 1976) and the national assessment and conservation policy guidelines known as the Burra Charter (drawn up in 1978).

Under the Whitlam Labor Government, the heritage agenda was expansive and inclusive. The concept of the National Estate was characterised as ‘the things we wanted to keep’ (DEC 1974: 20) and drew and grew across spectra of natural, social and Indigenous history energised by an array of community organisations. The high watermark for the National Estate was undoubtedly The Heritage of Australia, the sumptuous 1,200 page illustrated inventory published in 1981. The Register of the National Estate created by the AHC would eventually peak at around 13,000 places.

What comprised heritage was subject to professional discussion and debate with tensions between natural and cultural heritage evident and the primacy of the fabric-centric view of heritage challenged by the increasing recognition of social and intangible values. The scope of heritage exploded. Yet at the national level, the political environment also altered...
resulting ultimately in a narrowed and ‘inward’ (Productivity Commission 2006: 54) approach to heritage conservation. Political interest in the environment and heritage waxed and waned under governments of both political persuasions. From the 1990s, initially under Labor Prime Minister Keating and subsequently under the Howard Liberal Government, the roles and responsibilities for the environment and heritage were rationalised, ultimately with power devolving to local and state jurisdictions. This ‘streamlining’ effectively disentangled the Commonwealth from ‘the National Estate’ and left local government with the administration of the lion’s share of responsibility for heritage conservation.

In 2004 the Howard Liberal Government repealed the Australian Heritage Commission Act and the Commission was replaced by a Council lacking the Ministerial independence, resources and profile once enjoyed. An amended Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999 saw creation of two new heritage listings for items of National and Commonwealth significance. Although the protective power afforded to these places has been enhanced, they comprise a fraction of the total places previously covered by the Register. Since February 2012 all official references to the Register have been expunged.

The 2006 report by the Productivity Commission endorsed this depowering and further highlighted the unreasonable cost burdens of conservation for private owners and the importance of appeal rights to statutory listing (Productivity Commission 2006: 54). The halcyon days of the National Estate Grant program in the 1970s have never been equalled (Yencken 2008: 56–58). Resourcing for heritage has generally declined, notwithstanding a spike in funding in 2009–2010 as part of the now defunct Heritage Projects (Jobs Fund). Funding under the National Heritage Investment Initiative has also been terminated. The resources of the Commonwealth agency charged with heritage management have been curtailed and it now rests anonymously within the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPac). In March 2011 the Gillard Labor Government slashed its budget by a further 30 per cent (Canberra Times 2011).

The early idealism of Whitlam, Uren and DURD that empowered the development of the National Estate has seemingly all but evaporated. Strong bi-partisan political support for heritage appears to have substantially diminished. The standing of heritage nationally has been steadily eroded by legislative changes and funding cuts, a continuing process of ‘stealth and vandalism’ (Mulvaney 2008: 59–60). David Yencken (2008: 58), one of the key players in the 1970s, has called for a review of and strengthening of Federal powers and highlights an understanding of the lessons deriving from the early history of Commonwealth action as an integral part of that rethink. In late 2011 the Heritage and Wildlife Division of SEWPaC commenced work on a new National Heritage Strategy. In a political-economic climate watchful of government expenditure and shaped by other pressing priorities, the impact it will make on the national consciousness remains to be seen.

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**Endnotes**

(i) The Honourable Tom Uren was awarded an Order of Australia Companion (AC) in the General Division Australia Day Honours 2013 for eminent service to the community including the preservation of sites of heritage and environmental significance.

(ii) The Paddington Society was formed in 1964 by a group of residents concerned about the threatened changes to the historic and architectural character of the area. The Hunter’s Hill Trust was formed by a group of residents in 1968.